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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

THE CONGO'S JOSEPH MOBUTU: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
6 June 1966

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM*

The Congo's Joseph Mobutu: Past, Present, and Future

1. President Mobutu has twice startled observers of Congolese affairs recently. For the last month or so he has been carrying on a running vendetta with the Belgians, with whom he previously had been closely identified. Then on 31 May he ordered the summary execution of four run-of-the-mill politicians who had been caught in an inept plot against him. Mobutu has been a power in Congolese politics since the first months of independence, but until he installed himself as president last November he operated mainly behind the scenes and dealt directly with the Congo's problems only intermittently. Since then he has been immersed in those problems, and under their pressure questions of power and control have come to dominate his thinking. Both his animosity toward Belgium and his harsh treatment of the four unfortunate politicians stem from the importance he attaches to this question of control. Mobutu's basic aim is the unexceptionable one of making a credible state out of the Congo. The means he has chosen to this end, however, coupled with weaknesses of temperament and knowledge, are turning him toward authoritarianism and are likely to produce frequent rocky periods in his relations with the West.

2. Mobutu is a blend of soldier and politician unique in the Congo. His authority has always been based ultimately on the loyalty of the Congolese Army's higher ranking officers and on his control of army units in the Leopoldville area. His decisiveness

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[redacted] his low regard for most politicians, and also his tendency to think in terms of quick, simplistic "solutions" to problems, are perhaps manifestations of the military side of his nature. At the same time he has played the game of Congolese politics with distinction for over five years, and he genuinely respects the small cadre of civilian Congolese "intellectuals," many of whom can be found among his close advisers. He thus has served both as a bridge between civilians and the military and as a lightning rod, channeling military unhappiness and protecting the civilians from its consequences. His mediating role may in fact be one of the main reasons the army did not earlier intervene openly in politics.

3. Balancing the talents which Mobutu brings to the presidency are several major weaknesses. He has limited talent as a crowd-pleaser, being much more effective in behind-the-scenes politicking. His understanding of economic and administrative details is also limited, as is his interest in them. Perhaps most important, his temperament is mercurial and he tends to "shoot from the hip" when aroused--the other side of his decisiveness.

4. When he assumed the presidency, Mobutu faced the practically insoluble task of establishing his control over an anarchic area one third the size of the United States. This remains his over-riding concern. In the political field, considering the conditions with which he started and keeping in mind the questionable meaningfulness in the Congolese context of any talk of lines of authority, he is having some success. By fiat he has cut the number of provinces from 21 to 12, creating in the process some provinces of doubtful homogeneity and stability. He has then largely ignored provinces which seem to have fairly stable governments (e.g., Kongo Central along the lower Congo River) or which are intrinsically unimportant. Elsewhere he has intervened forcefully--by giving power to a military leader he feels he can trust, as in perennially troublesome Stanleyville or in Leopoldville itself; by dictating the composition of provincial cabinets, as in ex-Premier Tshombe's Sud-Katanga stronghold; or by a combination of these methods, as in deeply divided Sud-Kivu. These methods

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have given Mobutu more of a voice in provincial affairs than any previous government has had. It is not that Leopoldville's presence is felt either widely or deeply--on the contrary, Mobutu's influence may not extend beyond the provincial cabinets, and even there it may be more obstructive than constructive. This, however, is a greater degree of administrative control than any other Leopoldville figure has ever attained.

5. Mobutu's harsh treatment of the four plotters against the government must be viewed in this same light--another instance of Mobutu's preoccupation with extending his control. The plot never was a serious danger, but politicians are an ever-present potential threat to Mobutu's position, and the treatment of these four was clearly designed to discourage other would-be plotters, military as well as civilian. In this context there is little doubt that this "solution," too, will "work," at least for a while.

6. Actions such as this have important implications for the future. Mobutu is likely to be more and more inclined toward summary handling of political problems, and he probably will frequently order actions which do not sit well in some quarters in the Congo and abroad. These will be justified as necessary sacrifices in the Congo's progress toward national integration. At the same time, Mobutu and the top leaders in the army are likely to become increasingly interdependent. Mobutu's own success in neutralizing the politicians has rendered superfluous his role as mediator with the civilians. What is left is a simple division of power along the military chain of command. At present and for some time to come, he and his lieutenants will need each other, since neither can challenge the other without sapping his own strength. As long as the officers remain unwilling to test their power against Mobutu's, the disruptive opportunities for opponents of the regime will be severely limited. The military establishment itself, however, will probably become an ever-growing factor in the Congo's political life--particularly in the wake of the recent plot, in which were demonstrated both the criticality for Mobutu of the support of his officers and the apparent decision of those officers to stick with him.

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7. Mobutu is also trying to consolidate his control in the economic sphere. Here the object of his attention is not the Congo's administrative and political chaos but the continued pre-eminence of foreign, particularly Belgian, interests--a pre-eminence whose extent Mobutu says he did not realize until he became president. His sensitivity on this point is not lessened by frequently tactless handling of specific issues by individual Belgians: witness his rage at a copper price increase by the Union Miniere mining concern after what he considered inadequate consultation with his government.

8. He is trying to apply the same direct methods in this sphere which have had some success in politics; his decrees ordering that all important foreign communications and trade be channeled through Leopoldville, the sharp increase in Union Miniere's taxes, the delegation he sent to Brussels apparently with orders to renegotiate most of the interlocked Congolese-Belgian debt and investment structure--all these are of a piece with his peremptory dictation of the Sud-Katanga provincial cabinet's composition. Unfortunately for him, a transportation system cannot be altered by the kind of pressures which bring a provincial governor into line. Mobutu's lack of economic competence and his subordination of economics to questions of political control, coupled with the leverage which their economic position undeniably gives the Belgians, then produces a tendency to blame shadowy foreign interests for what Westerners would tend to call the economic facts of life.

9. Every time he has to give in to these facts of life, the feeling of frustration--of being thwarted by something which he does not fully understand and which stubbornly resists his efforts to control it--increases. His inability to manipulate the Belgians in the economic sphere leads him to question their role in politics, and he becomes inordinately sensitive to any report that Tshombe and certain Belgians are plotting his overthrow. His frustration may also be aggravated by a more general resentment of Congolese weakness and European strength which for many Congolese is a hangover from the colonial period.

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10. It is easy to exaggerate the extent of Mobutu's frustrations. He is an astute politician, and much of his anti-Belgian posturing is clearly for effect, both to burnish his "nationalist" image in the Congo and elsewhere in Africa, and to put maximum pressure on the Belgians. Nevertheless, his periodic rages over Belgian actions seem real enough. Their strength suggests that the factors, [redacted] which produced his current animosity toward the Belgians are built into his relationship with them.

[redacted]

In any case, Mobutu's overriding drive for control and his tendency to impose snap "solutions" in the course of that drive, suggest that his relations with Belgium--and with any other outside power which he feels is encroaching on his preserve--will be difficult for some time to come.

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